DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 390 FL 008 883

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TITLE Talking about the There and Then.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Child Language Research Forum (Stanford University, Stanford, California, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Language; Cognitive Processes; Communicative Competence (Languages); Language Ability; *Language Development; Language Research; *Language Usage; *Parent Child Relationship; *Pragmatics; Semantics
IDENTIFIERS *Conversational Strategies

ABSTRACT

This study describes some aspects of the emergence of displaced reference (talking about topics other than those in the immediate context) in conversations between a child and her parents. The data consisted of tape recorded interaction with the child between 17 and 36 months. During this period, speech about the here and now always dominated, but certain other topics emerged in a systematic way. For example, around 22 months, the child and her parents began to talk about family members who were not present. Somewhat later, a frequent topic was the previous events of the day. By the end of the period studied, the child answered questions about past events and non-present objects readily, though it was rare for her to introduce such topics into the conversation. Examples are given to illustrate the types of displaced reference used and the difficulties that sometimes arose when the topic was not in the here and now. It is suggested that the parents and child used several conversational strategies that helped to make early displaced reference successful. (Author)

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In Papers and Reports on Child Language Development, 13, 1977 (in press)

ED144390

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# TALKING ABOUT THE THERE AND THEN*

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One of the most striking characteristics about the speech of young children is its close relationship to a supporting nonlinguistic context. Brown and Bellugi (1964) captured the flavor of children's speech well when they described it as being about the "here and now." The fact that children talk about what they are seeing and doing makes it possible for caregivers to understand many utterances that would otherwise be uninterpretable. Indeed, much of the research on child language rests on the assumption that one can guess something about the child's intended meanings from the combination of the forms uttered and the context (Bloom, 1970; Brown, 1973).

Adults also talk mainly about the here and now when they interact with young children. Something of the meaning of the adult's utterance would often be clear even to a listener who did not comprehend the linguistic form at all. The fact that linguistic forms are used in semantically clear contexts makes it possible for the child to begin to break the code of the language, and learn what forms correspond with what meanings (Macnamara, 1972). Thus, it appears that the close correspondence between what is said and a supporting nonlinguistic context is an important characteristic of early speech both from the point of view of the adult and from the point of view of the child.

For conversational partners to communicate about events and objects outside the immediate context, a variety of cognitive, linguistic, and conversational skills are required, and it is not at all surprising that interactions with young children contain few instances of such reference. However, even from an early point in development, there is some speech about topics that are not in the here and now (e.g., Antinucci & Miller, 1976; Cromer, 1968; Keenan & Schieffelin, 1976). To date, we know little about how the child comes to deal with such topics, but it is certain that these changes in the child's use of language have profound implications for both interpersonal communication and thinking.

The ability to refer to objects or events not in the current context is one of the most important features setting language apart from other forms of communication. Hockett (1960) called this characteristic "displacement." As language evolved, it must have taken on an entirely new character once the potential for displaced reference was realized. An ordinary conversation between adult speakers need not have anything to do with the situation they find themselves in. Rather, it is generally the case that the support for interpreting messages comes from the listener's prior experiences and knowledge. The use of displaced reference is also fundamental to the role language plays in thought. In thinking, we re-present objects and events that are not currently at hand. In the evolution of thought, the use of a symbolic system with the capacity for displaced reference would have broadened the possibilities for

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information, storage, problem solving, and planning enormously.

The purpose of this study was to describe some aspects of the emergence of displaced reference in conversations between a child and her parents. As a child develops, we expect not only that displaced reference would become more frequent, but that such reference would become more successful. Furthermore, we expect that various strategies would be used by the talkers in order to make this intrinsically difficult communication task easier.

The child observed was my daughter, Naomi, a first-born child. The data consisted of transcripts of approximately 40 hours of taperecorded interactions between Naomi (ages 17 to 36 months) and her mother or father. These data were supplemented by a diary beginning at 11 months. Both child and parental utterances were coded for reference to objects that were not in sight and events that were not currently occurring.

The brief description of Naomi's development in this paper is organized into periods that reflect similar usage. Examples will be given to illustrate her use and comprehension of speech about the "there and then," in order to show when she had the ability to deal with these topics and how the topics first emerged. Speech about the here and now always dominated the conversations throughout the period studied, but at each point, some other topics seemed to be appropriate to talk about with Naomi, and some did not.

Time I. The earliest reference to non-present objects and persons (17 - 26 months)

By 15 months, Naomi used phonological forms modeled on many adult words. At this time, however, her words were never used as requests, either for objects that were in sight or out of sight. If she wanted something that she could not get herself, she would reach for it and whimper or make a panting sound that seemed to indicate wanting. At 17 months, Naomi began to use the names of objects in requesting them, including instances in which the object was not in sight. These requests provide the first clear evidence of the production of a word without a clear eliciting stimulus in the situation. At about the same time, she would often search for an object that was not in sight if an adult asked for it. Huttenlocher (1974) also reported that there was a point in development when the children she studied began to respond to requests for objects that were out of sight.

At 22 months, some conversational topics appeared that did not involve a direct link between naming and searching. This usage represents an advance over that described above, because it functioned to comment on something not in the current context rather than to express a need for it. There was a small set of frequently appearing topics that will be referred to as "conversational routines." In these routines, the topic and structure of the conversation was similar from time to time, but the exact content and linguistic forms were variable. One of these topics was the

location or activity of the non-present parent, as in examples (1), (2) and (3):

(1) 22:10, MLU 1.70
Child: Where's Daddy?
Adult: Daddy is working. Daddy will be home tonight. You'll see him tomorrow morning.
Child: Lab.
Adult: At the lab in Florida.

(2) 23:2, MLU 2.30
Child: Where's Daddy?
Adult: Daddy's working, honey.
Child: Daddy at the lab?
Adult: At the lab, yes.
Child: Where's monkey?
Adult: Monkeys are at the lab, too.

(3) 23:18, MLU 2.90
Child: Where's Daddy? Daddy's in work?
Adult: Daddy's at work, honey.

Other conversational routines involved asking about the moon (in the daytime) and the sun (in the evening), the location and "activities" of a doll, and asking about her grandmother. The conversation about grandmother eventually developed into a game in which Naomi would pretend to call her grandmother on a toy telephone. These conversational routines were initially very primitive as conversations go, but over time the child progressed from a small set of learned responses to using appropriate, variable speech content. As other types of displaced reference appeared in the parent-child discourse, they also tended to make their first appearance in conversational routines.

The basic problem for both child and parent in using displaced reference is that there is no easy way, such as pointing, to arrive at agreement about the topic. This problem was usually avoided because the early references to objects or people not present were cases in which there was only one possible referent, as in the examples above. With limited linguistic and cognitive abilities, the young child has great difficulty in adding information that would serve to identify an unknown referent. In the occasional instance in which Naomi mentioned a nonpresent referent that belonged to a large set, problems could arise, as in example (4):

(4) 22:18, MLU 2.11
(Naomi has been pushing a wastebasket around)
Child: I need it.
Adult: What do you need?
Child: I need the book.
Adult: Which one?
Child: I need the book
Adult: The big one? The Sears catalog?

Child: (growing upset) The book. The book. The book.

Turning now to events outside the current content, we find very little such reference at Time I. In coding the data for temporal displacement, a distinction was made between reference to events that had just occurred or were about to occur in the immediate situation and events that were further removed in time. The utterance fall down said upon landing would have been coded as a "completion." The utterance go slide said in answer to the question What did you do at Grandma's would have been coded as "past." The utterance get down said just before climbing down would have been coded as an "intention". The utterance see Michael today? would have been coded as "future."

During this period, Naomi referred almost exclusively to ongoing events, completions, and intentions. Around 22 months, she started to use endings for completed events (for example, I throwded it, I doed it.). In spite of the "past tense ending," the context of the utterances showed that Naomi still did not talk about events from the past, but only events that had just occurred. Naomi's parents interpreted the fact that many of her verbs had -ed endings as a sign that she was beginning to "use past tense." However, when we look at what they said to her, we find that it was not influenced by their incorrect impression about her syntax. In fact, they continued to talk almost exclusively about events in the current context. Naomi's lack of response to the occasional question or statement about the past probably indicated to them that she was still quite limited in her ability to talk about past events.

Time II. Reference to the past events of the day (27-31 months)

At 27 months, the appropriate topics broadened to include activities and events that had occurred within a limited temporal framework: the current day. Naomi's verbs began to be marked with -ed endings to signal past tense as well as completion, and a number of lexical items appeared that reflected her growing awareness of temporal relationships, including yet, already, still, in a minute and yestermorning (used to refer to any time in the past. A frequent conversational routine involved asking about the events of the day. At first, the adult supplied questions and answers, and Naomi responded with imitations. These interactions may have helped her learn how to respond appropriately. Eventually, the routines became conversations, as in example (5):

(5) 27:21, MLU 3.24
(late afternoon after picking up Naomi from sitter)
Adult: What did you do today with Kimberly? Can you tell me?
Child: I played toys with Kimberly.
Adult: You played toys with Kimberly?
Child: I put the toys away.
Adult: You put the toys away?
Child: I put the tinker toys away.
Adult: Oh, the tinker toys.
Child: Was messy.

Adult: It was messy?
Child: Yep.
Adult: Oh.
Child: In Kimberley's room.

These conversations about the events of the day seem to form a bridge between reference to current events and reference to past events in general. Even within the constraint of this familiar routine, conversations were sometimes unsuccessful, as in example (6):

(6) 27:21, MLU 3.24
Adult: Did you go anywhere today, honey?
Child: Stores.
Adult: You went to the store?
Child: The stores.
Adult: What store did you go to?
Child: I don't like that store.
Adult: You don't like it? Which store?
Child: That store there. (no referent in sight).
Adult: Which store, honey?
Child: That one.

Time III. Reference to past experiences and future plans (32-36 months)

The topics that were appropriate broadened during this period to include past experiences and future plans, and Naomi responded readily when these topics were introduced by her parents. Although conversations involving displaced reference were never very long, they were quite frequent. Example (7) is a conversation about a non-present object:

(7) 35:13, MLU 3.70
(Naomi sitting with mother; father is getting ready to leave but can't find his shoes)
Mommy: Do you know where Daddy's shoes are?
Child: No. Maybe they're in the bathroom.
Daddy: In the what?
Child: I don't know where they is.
Daddy: I'll find them.
Child: I know where your shoes are.
Mommy: Where, honey?
Child: In the bedroom.
Mommy: (calls) In the bedroom.
(Mother comments about Naomi's popsicle)
Child: (to father) You found the shoes?
Daddy: Yes, thank you.

The spontaneous use of displaced reference was still not frequent in Naomi's speech although she did increasingly relate her current perceptions to more general knowledge. For example, while playing with play dough, she said Yestermorning I maked a tiger; when she saw some birds that we called "puffins" in a book, she said Puffins like in my Magic Carpet book. When Naomi introduced a topic not in the context, the conver-

sation was successful if the referent was easily identified. If not, she continued to have difficulty in knowing what information to supply for the listener although she clearly had sufficient command of the required linguistic forms per se. In example (8), Naomi paraphrased "dancing" with "happy" after the adult's request for more information and indicated that the target referent was "a book" after the adult asked whether the people were on TV, but was able to supply no other clues:

(8) 32:14, MLU 3.22
Child: I had those dancing people. (no referent in sight)
Adult: What dancing people, Nomi?
Child: Happy people.
Adult: What happy people, Nomi?
Child: Happy people.
Adult: What happy people? Do you mean puppets?
Child: Uh uh.
Adult: Clowns?
Child: Uh uh.
Adult: On television? People on television?
Child: I need that book about dancing people.
Adult: You need the book about dancing people. You mean the Fantasia book? The book about dancing hippopotamuses?
Child: (shouting) I need dancing book. I need it.
Adult: Well, where is it, Nomi? Do you know where it is?
Child: No, I don't know.
Adult: Well, we're trying to figure out which one you want so we can get it. (Naomi has been growing more and more frantic and is now crying).
Adult: Hey, hey, calm down. Tell us more about the book so maybe we'll be able to figure out which one it is.
Child: (crying) I need the dancing people.

## Conclusions

These examples from conversations between parents and a child under three years of age show that they did not talk exclusively about the here and now. When displaced reference first appeared in the data, it was found to be limited to a few, highly constrained topics. As the child developed, reference to objects and events outside the current context became more frequent and the range of topics that was appropriate to discuss broadened systematically.

In the period studied, reference to the there and then was not always successful. The parents and child used two strategies in their early interactions that seemed to make communication easier. The first of these was the creation of conversational routines. Initially, these routines functioned as a form of playful interaction between the adult and child. With a routine, the constant structure helps to make the parent-child interaction successful by insuring that each knows what to expect of the other. The variability permitted within the routine helps to insure that neither party becomes bored. Furthermore, it would seem

that this sort of linguistic play between parent and child can provide a framework for the child's developing linguistic and cognitive abilities. Conversational routines might play a role in the early stages of learning of any aspect of the language, and some examples are already to be found in the literature. Bruner (1975) has argued that play between the mother and prelinguistic child allows for the development of early semantic relationships and Sachs and Truswell (in press) found that mothers of children in the one-word stage used linguistic routines that could help the child learn to understand action-object sentences. In the data presented here, there were conversational routines that provided an opportunity for the use of displaced reference. In each case, the general topic was set (for example, talking about the moon or discussing the events of the day). However, the exact content and linguistic forms within that conversational topic were variable and became progressively less fixed over time until there was no longer a routine at all, but simply a possible topic of conversation.

I would not want to suggest that the parents deliberately designed these routines in order to present new linguistic information to the child. In fact, it seems quite clear in my data that it was primarily the child who controlled the topic of conversation. One important area for future research is to determine those aspects of the child's speech and behavior that signal the parent when various topics are appropriate.

The second strategy that made displaced reference easier during this early period in the child's development was talking about objects or events that were unique. Almost all the successful conversations had to do with referents for which no further specification was required. When Naomi brought up a topic that could not be identified easily, the problem for her seemed to be in knowing what additional information to supply. Since the selection of appropriate features is dependent on an evaluational of the listener's knowledge, we would expect that children even considerably older than 3 years would be limited in their ability to introduce new topics into a conversation.

By the end of the period studied, when Naomi was 3, she could engage in conversations about shared past experiences and non-present objects with no support from the immediate environmental context. These interactions were short, but had the flavor of real conversations. Though most of the talk focused on the here and now, both parent and child frequently related the current perceptions to prior experiences and knowledge.

The ability to deal with topics not limited to the here and now is the foundation of the unique aspects of human thought and social interaction. The existence of displaced reference results in more than the ability to talk about things that are not present in space and time. It also allows for the possibility of hypothesizing, lying, and fantasizing. Learning more about the child's gradual entry into the world of the there and then should have important implications for our understanding of the complex relationships among cognitive development, social development, and language development.

FOOTNOTE

*Part of this research was supported by a grant for Basic Research in Education from the U.S. Office of Education and a grant from the University of Connecticut Research Foundation.

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